THE WIRE

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david byrne

new york stories

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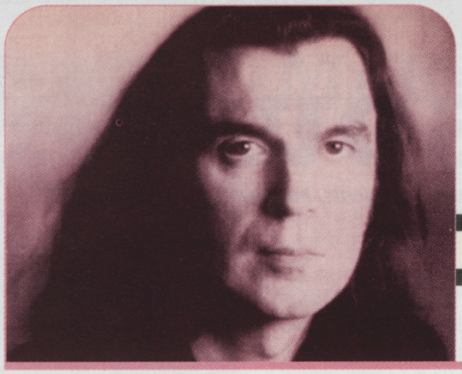

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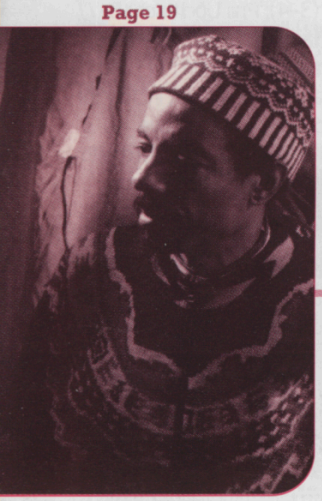

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Special thanks this issue to Biba Kopf

sounding off

News, live events, happenings. . .

Compiled by Rob Young

News items should reach us by Thursday 9 June for inclusion in the July issue

Meltdown, the South Bank arts festival (26 June–3 July), is under the directorship of Dutch composer Louis Andriessen this year (see feature page 36). This year's events kick off with The Steve Martland Band joining forces with 'art terrorists' Housewatch, to turn one side of the Royal Festival Hall into a giant cinema screen alongside live performance involving bicycles entitled *Imaginary Opera* (25). It continues with a marathon concert (26, 2 pm–10 pm) with most of the coming week's participants; a screening of four Peter Greenaway films for TV including *M Is For Man, Music And Mozart*, with an Andriessen score (28–29); the world premiere of a new opera by Martin Butler, *Craig's Progress* (28); Icebreaker's fifth birthday concert (29); and recitals by The Gavin Bryars Ensemble (1–2 July), Philip Glass Ensemble (3) and The Asko Ensemble performing the British premiere of Andriessen's *De Materie* (1–3). Booking is handled by the South Bank Box Office: 071 928 8800.

Girls Against Boys, the kings and queens of the burgeoning Queercore movement (allegedly) undertake a short tour in June, at Brighton Richmond (16), London Garage (17), Leicester Princess Charlotte (18), Newcastle Riverside (19), Glasgow Cathouse (20), Wigan Pier (21), and Leeds Duchess (22).

Michael Nyman is featured composer at the Bath International Music Festival: his music appears in a 'minimalist' bloat-out (3 June, new work, plus Górecki, Bryars, Pärt, Nono, Satie, sung by Sarah Leonard); and The Nyman Band play music from *The Piano* soundtrack (3, The Forum). There's also a Composers' Workshop organised by the Society For The Promotion Of New Music (5); a contemporary recital from the excellent Smith Quartet (10); The Lindsay Quartet playing Tippett (11) and jazz gigs from The Brecker Brothers (5), David Murray with David Jean Baptiste and Orphy Robinson (8) and John Surman with his Brass Project and Norwegian vocalist Karin Krog (10). Booking and more information on 0225 463362.

The Jazz Cafe in North London (071 916 6000) has confirmed dates for June as follows: The Brodsky Quartet (1–2), Ruby Turner (3–4), Phil Upchurch (6–7), Chico Hamilton (8–9), Tony Remy (10), Steve Williamson (11) and Darkman (14). Look out in July for New York crew The Groove Collective (1–2), Donald Byrd with The Blackbyrds (13) and Greg Osby (16).

Northern Exposure (11–19) is the first event of its kind to be held in Newcastle. It will feature live rock and jazz, screenings of classic rock movies, videos and high/lowlights of the 80s TV series *The Tube*. There's also a seminar on that important 90s phenomenon Take That, and talks by Creeper turned Radio One producer Mark Riley, and Gerard Langley, resident poet of The Blue Aeroplanes. Ring 091 276 5262 for further details.

start making sense

David Byrne, the thin white duke of New York art pop, is back with a new album, and a new outlook on life. Kim Green spoke to him in New York. Photography by Kevin Knight.

David Byrne moves slowly. He composes his body with as much grace as is possible for someone with his incorrigibly awkward stature. He is rail thin. His hair is shoulder length and tied back in a neat pony tail. His voice comes out slow and thoughful. On this day, he is to be found busily preparing tea for himself and his interviewer. He brings seltzer water in a bottle marked 'Made In Argentina' to quench our thirst while the tea water boils. "Hi, I'm David," he says.

David Byrne's music has often been as unsettling as that deadpan introduction. On the surface it seems straightforward enough, but it seethes with bizarre, schizophrenic undercurrents. It's clear but cloudy; literal and unimaginable. Above all, Byrne's music imparts the sensation of someone a little uncomfortable in their own skin. His lyrics make sense out of nonsense and vice versa. His singing voice takes leaps and dips as unexpected as they are non-traditional.

You could say that Byrne is something of an anomaly in contemporary American music, in that he has managed to pursue an erratic, sometimes wilfully obscurantist aesthetic while retaining a high popularity rating. His music has integrated sounds from the farthest corners of the globe and all around the human psyche to create a tradition of sound in which he is the sole occupant. Byrne's persona has embodied paranoia, strangeness and brilliance all at once. His gaunt psycho killer look of the early 70s grew into the frenzied, big suited, wild eyed nerd of the 80s. In the late 80s, he left Talking Heads and went solo. Today he sports the muted colours and classic cuts that spell 'serious musician'.

However he decides to wrap it up, Byrne's music, hoarded by many and abhorred by others, confounds everyone. Those who say they 'get it' are lying (because even Byrne admits he doesn't get some of it). But they *feel* what Byrne represents: a sense of terminal displacement. In the 90s, acute alienation ails us all.

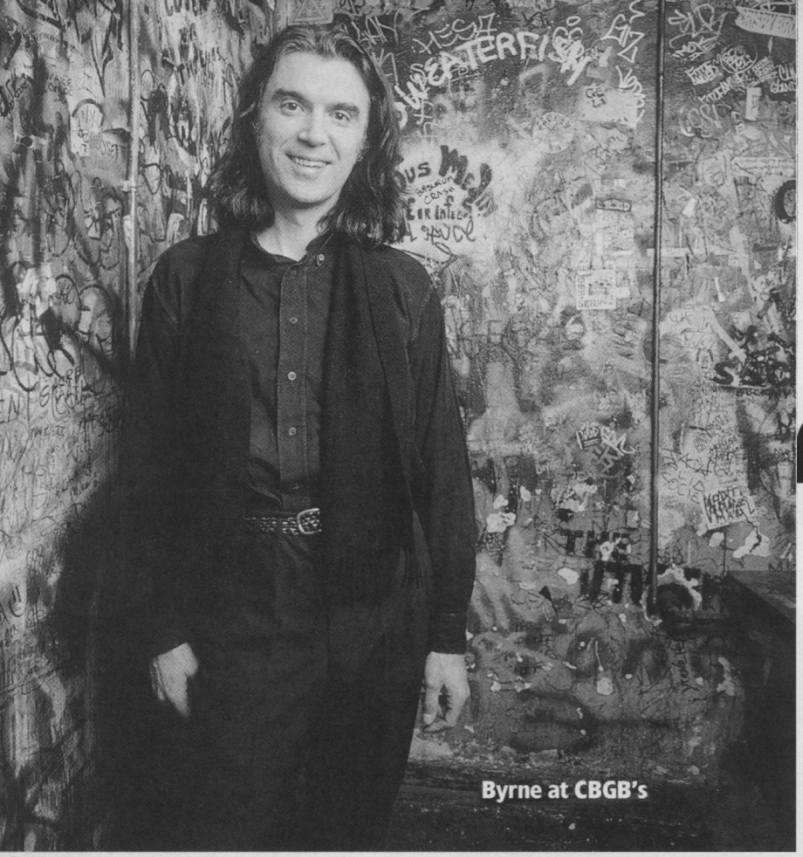
The music of Talking Heads was populated by characters from the underbelly of urban America: strange, quirky, ingenious or just plain weird. They wondered aloud about life, and their attempts to rearrange themselves into new shapes. They scientifically sought new places to exist and new frontiers to conquer. 'Anywhere but here,' was the message.

Byrne's own sense of alienation, manifested across Talking Heads' various albums and four solo releases, is not a gimmick. With his eyes darting around the room, he briefly speaks about it, calling it his "own little thing. . . I think I've gotten over it a lot. Probably being in a somewhat successful group helped a lot. It might have been a reason I got into music, it forced me to be more social. It was a way to meet people, where I didn't have to think of an opening line when talking to somebody. I didn't need to think of what to talk about; there was always something to talk about."

Byrne gives off an aura of comfortable unease. He seems to get jittery in the company of strangers. When the tea water boils he runs to the kitchen and sweeps back in with teapot, cups, spoons and his prized collection of sugar packets from around the world. He starts pouring the tea but he's embarrassed: it's too strong, flowing rich and dark. He prepares his own with sugar but doesn't touch it. Maybe he just had to be doing *something* with his hands for these first few minutes of being alone with a stranger.

Byrne avoids eye contact. He looks around a lot, smiles rarely, laughs even less. He is serious about music and probably not much else. His new family seems to be off limits when it comes to the business of songwriting. "I am very aware that I don't write records about family life. Kids are wonderful, but sometimes it doesn't always work in a song," he says, sarcastically.

The first floor of the New York house that is his family home is occupied by the offices of Luaka Bop. This is the record label (named after a tea bag, as it happens) that he set up in order to provide a high profile US outlet for the Brazilian and Cuban music that so inspires his own records. He calls the label "a labour of love" and says he started it in order to "fill the gaps of what I couldn't find in record stores; to try to



Byrne at CBGB's

"People expect me to be some kind of maniac... and there's probably a part of me that's like that."

fill a niche I thought wasn't being covered." The label is distributed by Warner Brothers, but Byrne has also helped to bankroll its various releases. "When it started, I didn't think of the finance of it at all. I know a little bit better now." Presently he is gearing up to put out a record by a group from Okinawa called Shoukichi Kini. He describes their music as "a little Japanese with ska and reggae mixed in." Actually they sound like The Chipmunks singing in Japanese over Country/punk backing tracks. Does he worry about them selling a million records? "It sometimes doesn't succeed," he says, "but it's always interesting."

The office is open and airy, with earthy Brazilian music providing background ambience. There are maps on the walls and several clocks keeping time across various time zones. On one side of the room, CD stacks line the wall. None of the artists are likely to make the charts. Few of them have names you could comfortably pronounce.

David Byrne's music has always exhibited a degree of alien wanderlust. A yearning for the 'great beyond' is precisely what made his work with Talking Heads so original, and was the ultimate reason he became a solo artist. "On one level, we. . . uh. . . on one level, I felt like there was a growing kind of animosity towards the. . . uh. . . range of things that I would do without the band," he says referring to his split from the group. "Whether it was a movie or staging a show or writing the songs or working on the covers of what I was doing, there was a resentment of however creatively ambitious I was being. That was not a healthy atmosphere to work within. Another thing was something that happens with almost every group after a while — you just want to see what's on the other side of the fence. It may be better or worse, but you can't resist it. People call it 'creative differences'; often you just want to explore new territories. Our musicial tastes were diverging a lot, so it became harder to communicate musically. If you say, 'Let's play a section that feels like this', and they don't know what you're talking about, it's kind of hard work."

On the group's last album, *Naked*, it was Byrne's desire to integrate new sounds into the group's angular NYC pop that took them to Paris, using the city's community of African musicians to add 'exotic' flavour to what was an ordinary but solid album of typical Talking Heads songs. Byrne now regards that album as the beginning of his solo career. "[The split] has been better for me," he says now. "I had no choice but to do this to survive creatively and mentally."

What's most intriguing about David Byrne is how 'normal' he should have been and how 'exotic' he has become. After all, he is a white guy from Baltimore, who went to The Rhode Island School Of Design, met some 'folks', started a band and terminally changed the future possibilities of rock music. He says his penchant for ethnic rhythms and urban grooves comes from a simple recognition of how good they are. "There's so much great music that is really moving that comes from other places," he says. "For a long time it wasn't getting heard, it wasn't getting played on the radio. It was kind of obscure. At least for myself, I decided to try and find out as much as I could, because I feel like what we're spoonfed is only a little tiny part of what's going on in the world, whether it be music, movies, politics or whatever."

Continued on page 73

David Byrne *continued from page 28*

Although connecting and communicating (on any kind of profound level) with musicians from Africa and Brazil should have proved difficult for someone with his background, it has been remarkably easy, he claims; maybe because he is so uncomfortable in his own WASPish skin. "I often find that I have a lot in common with the musicians that I work with. The project we're working on is a middle ground. We are fond of the same music, and it becomes easy to write or arrange something together."

One of his most important activities these days, he says, is to "slowly overcome the racism that was instilled in me by society. As much as we like to say to ourselves, 'I'm not racist; everybody equal', you find that these pretty nasty little things come out that are stuck in you by society, newspapers and your parents. It's a situation where the tide is running one way and in order to work it out you have to fight against it constantly. It could take your whole life. When I started working with black musicians in the late 70s, I realized there were values and attitudes that I was bringing. I could sense it, I was not being completely honest with myself and I didn't feel comfortable with that."

Years before he began experimenting with world rhythms, Byrne was making use of urban American grooves with Talking Heads. From 1979's conga-driven "I Zimbra" on the group's *Fear Of Music* album, to the 'reverse crossover' (from the mainstream charts into the black clubs) of 1983's "Burning Down The House", funk and soul have been constant and integral elements in Byrne's music. "A good groove is a transcending force in music," he says. "It becomes a framework that allows you a lot of freedom on top to mess around with. Someone once wrote that a good groove suspends time. It creates another kind of time in the universe and you're released from your everyday world. That's ultimately what it's about."

A decade on from those early experiments, Byrne is still wondering how the segregated American press either 'didn't get' that aspect of the group's music or were too stubborn, in the 'disco sucks' era, to acknowledge that their latest rock darlings were derivative of disco (read: black) music. "It was so strange that they completely missed that part of what we were doing right from the start. So much of it was groove orientated. . . They heard it, but they didn't want to say it."

He says that such an attitude has prevented him from gaining comparable success with his more recent work. "The United States has been like, 'We liked you when you did this — you should have stuck to that.'" (Of "Burning Down The House", a huge hit, he says, "Good song but I can't keep doing the same song. I can keep playing it, but I can't keep writing it.")

The new album, simply titled *David Byrne*, is a more streamlined affair than the heady (if somehat heavy handed) explorations of Brazilian and African forms that characterised *Rei Momo*, or the ambitious theatrical orchestrations of *The Forest*. "I though I should try and find a middle ground on this record," he says. "I thought if I kept the arrangements really simple and the instrumentation pretty sparse, maybe some of the intensity and emotion could be preserved and yet it would still have the impact of sounding like a band. I don't know if we got it on every song but I feel good about most of it.

"On the last record (*Uh Oh*) we toured with a ten piece band — horn section, percussionists. The music had lots of arrangements of different instruments and things. In preparing the songs for that record, I did a few dates where I played with acoustic guitar and drum machine only. I sensed, and other people told me, that the songs came across better that way. You could hear what they were about, you could hear the melodies better and you could hear my personal involvement with the songs and whatever emotion was there.

"Maybe it wasn't as powerful and didn't get everybody up and dancing, but it was a more directly emotional experience. That was important to me. [The new album] is somewhat different to what I've done all my life. Most of the music I've done has been about ideas or me singing from a character's point of view. It's not usually about baring my soul and just being about the emotion of what the song is about. That's what's new for me. It's a challenge and it's meaningful to me."

Byrne is soft spoken and polite, but he is not an easy interviewee. His conversation is measured, guarded even. In answering a query he will pause to make sure he's being clear and adds a degree of self-deprecation to anything that might come across as appearing too confident or flippant. He is amused by the thought that people are surprised at his calm demeanour when they meet him (and says that the hysteria inside of him, and his music, is not there "quite as much" anymore). "People expect me to be some kind of maniac, a really twitchy, kind of disturbed person. . . and there's probably a part of me that's like that. I used to be more — not anti-social — but less accustomed to being natural around people.

"It probably has something to do with age. As you get older you become more willing to bare emotions. You develop a 'don't give a shit' attitude. . . It's better for me to be honest than try and be cool or whatever. . . Which sometimes can work. . . And sometimes you can just end up talking about yourself and nobody cares."

People should care about this calmer, quieter, more melodic David Byrne. On the new record, although he is still singing about encroaching technology, little creatures and out of body experiences, he is also talking about love, aging, human responsibility, death and loneliness. The opening "A Long Time Ago", a dark, tribal composition, is a mature song for Byrne because it acknowledges that the past is dead: *"And that roaring that you hear/Is only the blood that circles constantly/No, it is not applause my dear/No, that was a long time ago."* "Buck Naked", where Byrne attempts to explain the process of death to his daughter, and was written as they watched her aunt die from AIDS, relies heavily on his folk tendencies. It is a deceptively light song that he says was his "response at the moment": *"Well we're naked inside/You're naked too/Well there's nothing to fear/And there's nothing we can do."*

Byrne sings these songs in the same ghostly, sinewy voice that has haunted and menaced us for years. What does he think of it as an instrument? "It's not a great singing voice. In fact, it's just getting a little easier for me to listen to it. I always wished I had a good voice. If I did I could get away with lyrics that I never could before.

"But I can get something over just with the phrasing and a little bit of emphasis and embellishment and accents here and there. I have to figure out a way that I can work within what I've got in a way that better singers couldn't do. . . Sometimes they'll sing too good.

"When I first started out, I was intentionally being a little weird. . . I'm probably guilty of that, I probably needed to do it. It was a way of drawing attention to myself, to say, 'Hey, I'm different from everybody else!' I did that in the singing. Sometimes I thought the songs were great, sometimes I thought. . . I just did them to be weird, but that's all right."

As for all the things he has written and will write that neither you nor he will understand, he says, "When you blurt something out and haven't censored yourself, your first instinct is to cover up because it doesn't make sense, rather than just letting it be there. It's a mistake to censor those kind of irrational utterances. They are often the deepest things you say." □

David Byrne *is released this month on WEA.*